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ABSTRACT

Using word processing in the elementary school writing curriculum is advantageous for both students and teachers. Word processors motivate students to spend more time on task, encourage changes and rewriting, and eliminate concern for neatness and the tedium of writing (and rewriting) by hand. Teachers can see that students using the word processor understand more clearly that the first draft is not the end product. Students become more open to criticism when composing on the computer, and the teacher can easily demonstrate editing processes without "messing up" students' papers. The teacher still uses the process approach to teaching writing, but is also responsible for instructing students to use the word processor effectively and properly and for setting up a classroom management system for access to the computer. Management and teaching suggestions to make the program function smoothly include (1) limiting computer time to 20-minute segments, (2) using a sign-up book or chart for computer time, (3) setting up a schedule with prescribed times for use, (4) discussing a student's text on the monitor as he or she is working with it, (5) teaching only simple commands, (6) encouraging peer editing while the text is on the screen, (7) providing students with their own discs, and (8) allowing students to correct one type of error at a time (spelling, punctuation, paragraphing) and to make a new printout after each kind of correction. (HTH)

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Word Processing With the Elementary School Student -A Teaching and Learning Experience for both Teachers and Students

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There are many advantages to using a word-processor. The most immediate one that is extremely obvious, is that students want to write more often and produce better and longer compositions. This has been noted by others as well. (Kleiman & Humphrey, 1982) What follows will explain what a word-processor is, the advantages of using one, the role of the teacher and student, how children learn to use the word processor, problems associated with word-processors, management techniques, and some miscellaneous observations that have implications for teaching and research.

It should be noted that what follows is based on my own teaching experiences. I consider my experiences limited since I have only incorporated the use of the word-processors as a means to teach writing recently into my reading/language arts center. However, I am quite enthusiastic about what I have been observing. I consider that I am still in process of learning how to use them effectively, and would consider any feedback in the form of additions, and criticisms helpful. It is my philosophy that as educators, we are responsible to continue adding to our body of knowledge concerning techniques to improve our teaching.

What is a Word Processor?

A word processor is a computer program that one can purchase which allows a student to write text, make deletions, insertions, move text around, combine paragraphs, and create new paragraphs. As it does all of the above when commanded by the user, it adjusts the rest of the text to accommodate changes without retyping. One purpose for a word processor is to encourage students to write clear and neat copy.

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Advantages of Using a Word Processor:

For the student who uses the word processor for writing, there is more intense involvement during the actual time he/she is working. I have found that the student stays with his/her task for a longer period of time and does so much more willingly. The student is also willing to make editing changes more often, and usually responds to criticism more positively than ever before because of the ease of the task itself, and the elimination of the need for total rewriting. The student has the ability to make corrections and changes on the screen before the teacher even sees what has been written by the student and this tends to reduce anxiety about writing. The student is no longer worried about the neatness of his/her paper due to erasures, crossouts, additions, and deletions; nor does the student have to worry about punctuation errors either as s/he is putting his/her ideas into print. The concept of a first draft becomes easier to understand and a natural part of the process of writing itself. The student is also excited to see how much neater and easier it is to read this first draft copy.

Another advantage for the student, is that handwriting is no longer a factor, for the student can clearly see what has been written, and for that matter, so can the teacher. No longer can little squiggles be said to be something that does not really exist. No longer are children hampered by poor handwriting ability. Further, because spelling can easily be corrected, students are more likely to try difficult to spell words because they know they can easily be corrected at a later time without the need to rewrite. They are more likely to write using the vocabulary they use to speak, rather than their writing being determined by what they can spell. We see then a greater maturity in the writing itself. For all these reasons, students using the word-processor to write, produce longer and better compositions and write more often.

For the teacher there are also many advantages in having students write using a word processing program. For one, the teacher sees that the students understand more clearly that the first draft is not the end product for the word processor itself encourages revision. As noted before, students are more willing to accept criticisms because it means

more computer time. It is fun to use a word processor. Another advantage to the teacher is that it is easy to demonstrate what is meant when editing is called for without "messaging-up" the student's paper. For example, elementary school students love to write dialogue, but few make the association from the way dialogue is written in the literature they read or from their basals to their own work. Often the student writes one large paragraph confusing who said what and never giving each speaker a separate paragraph. With a few commands, the teacher can demonstrate this on the computer with the student's own text. Following this, the student does it for him/herself without rewriting or "messaging-up" what s/he has already written and worked so hard to create. Of course, they have also learned the proper way to write dialogue. One wonderful advantage for the teacher, is the ability to read everything the student has written with ease. Lastly, the teacher sees her students as having much more enthusiastic attitudes towards writing itself.

Role of the Teacher

The teacher is responsible for instructing his/her students to use the word-processor effectively and properly. Also the teacher is responsible for setting up a management system for access to the computer since this is usually a problem because of a limited student/computer ratio. As far as the actual writing is concerned, the teacher still plays the same role as s/he had done previously using the writing process approach to the teaching of writing. The teacher can still be involved in stimulating writing, giving instructions, sharing writing, orienting, reviewing, rewriting, editing, orienting, evaluating and writing. The only aspect of this process that may change, is the location of where some of these activities take place, and the mode of demonstration.

How Children Learn to Use the Word-Processor

I have found the following techniques to be effective for teaching elementary students in the use of the word processor and its wonders.:

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- 1) Student Observation - Teacher Model - The teacher initiates and types a group story as the students dictate it and then makes suggestions for change. This is an excellent motivating technique and a good application of the word processor. The teacher can then print out several copies for the group to discuss and for further editing suggestions and then do the actual editing on the computer as the students watch. This provides motivation to write as they see the wonders of the word-processing program demonstrated which greatly aids in the use and understanding of the writing process.
- 2) Student Models - Teach a few students to use the word processor who can serve as models and can then teach the other students. Word processing is easiest taught on a one to one basis with the learner actually using the computer.
- 3) Prewritten Text - Using several computers, and a prewritten program, instruct small groups to make insertions, deletions, move text, enter and leave the program correctly, etc., using the proper commands.
- 4) Keep charts up with the proper commands and rules for using the computer and the word-processing program properly.

Problems Associated With Word-Processors

The following is a list of possible problems associated with using word processors for writing. It is important to be aware of them in order to understand and handle these problems as they arise. Be prepared! There will be problems, but they can be accommodated.

- 1) Students (and sometimes teachers) misuse the word processing disks. Disks can be "crashed" resulting in destruction of text.
- 2) Computers are not always available when needed by the student.
- 3) The printers are not always available when needed by the student.

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4) Because of the limitation of the screen size, and the very nature of it, there is an inability to view the entire text at once, or quickly on the screen.

5) There is a disadvantage in not knowing how to touch type, however, students can compensate for this to an extent by having knowledge of the keyboard. There are commercial programs available to aid in the acquisition of this knowledge such as Random House's Alphabet Keyboard. Encourage the students to use two hands to type. They learn the keyboard rather rapidly.

Management and Teaching Suggestions:

The following is a list of suggested management techniques. You may need one or all of them to make your program function smoothly.

1) Limit time on the computer to 20 minutes when many students need to use it. Students can write on the printed draft and later enter this onto the disk. Not all writing needs to be created while the student is working at the computer.

2. Have a sign-up book or chart for the students so the teacher can monitor who is using the computer, and how often. (In an elementary classroom, not all students will use the computer for their compositions. This will increase the amount of time for those who like to use it. Many students still prefer to write with a pencil and a paper only.)

3. Set up a schedule for the students with prescribed times for use. Very often need determines whose name goes on the schedule.

4. If you work with small groups during a writing time, discuss an individual student's text on the monitor as he is working on it. The student can try out different things as you work with him.

5. Teach only the simplest commands - do not make it too difficult to use.

6. Encourage peer editing while the text is on the screen.

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7. Each student should have their own disk. It avoids problems such as crashing disks, and two students needing the same disk at the same time.
8. Be very strict about the care of the computer, the disks, and the rules associated with management.
9. Editing - When mechanical and spelling errors appear to be many and seem overwhelming, do the following : correct one type of error at a time and do a print out after each correction. This keeps the task less complicated looking for the student. For example, correct punctuation, or spelling, or paragraphing, etc.

Miscellaneous Observations

1. The most dramatic changes in children's writing occur with students who have demonstrated difficulty forming the actual letters on paper. They are not hampered by their poorly developed handwriting skills. They are extremely enthusiastic students, for they experience major success in writing as compared to previous paper and pencil attempts.
2. Students who have in the past claimed that they have written something that in fact did not exist, (between the lines) can see the truth of the matter more clearly. This has resulted in a heightened sense of audience awareness.
3. Writing on the microcomputer seems to cause the elimination of "the end of the paper syndrome" since there is no visible end of the paper. In the past I've noticed that children naturally try to bring their writing to a close when they reach the end of their paper. Since they see no paper, they are not cued in for closure. This is probably one reason why children write longer text.

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